

WORK, MONEY, AND HEALTH  
ADVICE FOR BUSY PEOPLE

# balance



## THE “CLEAN EATING” RULES TO FOLLOW— AND BREAK

Not-so-good news: Eating clean isn't as great as we've been led to believe. Still, the trend does contain some nutritional pearls of wisdom. We separate the smart stuff from the pseudoscience.

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**IF YOU'VE JUST ABOUT** had it with diets—the complicated guidelines, the weird and expensive packaged foods, the quit-and-try-again cycle—the clean eating movement of the past several years may seem like a green, glowing, Gwyneth-worthy breath of fresh air. But the strange thing is, it's difficult to agree on exactly what it means. Many common clean eating rules, like consuming more vegetables, seem smart, but some people's ideas about clean eating are actually unhealthy or bogus (no, you don't need a juice cleanse to keep your liver working well, and processed food isn't slowly killing you). And make no mistake: Clean eating is still a diet, even if it comes in prettier packaging. If you fall off the wagon and eat something "dirty," you're right back where you started, feeling terrible about the way you eat.

Still, there are many tenets of the "clean" lifestyle that almost every expert can agree are great for you. Read on for a few elements of your diet that might benefit from a little cleanup—and some you might want to leave alone.

## GO AHEAD AND...

### Cut back on sugar.

Though the American Heart Association recommends women get no more than 25 grams (or 6 teaspoons) of added sugar a day, the average American consumes more than 70 grams. The problem: Excess sugar is linked to metabolic syndrome, a cluster of symptoms (including obesity and high blood pressure) that can raise your risk for diabetes and heart disease.

Luckily, you don't have to scour nutrition facts on everything you eat to uncover hidden sugar. "The added sugar in foods like ketchup and pasta sauce isn't a big deal," says Joan Salge Blake, EdD, RDN, clinical associate professor of nutrition at Boston University. Instead, focus on big-ticket items, like desserts and sugary beverages. And remain wary of less refined sweeteners, such as those

made with honey and agave. These healthier-sounding sugars are popular with some in the clean eating camp, but they still count as added sugar, and you shouldn't be eating too much of them.

### Eat more vegetables.

In a perfect world, you'd consume 2½ cups of vegetables a day. But just 9 percent of us meet that goal, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Why is that bad? Seven of the top 10 leading causes of death in the U.S. are chronic diseases—and a diet rich in veggies, which contain fiber, vitamins, minerals, and antioxidants, can help lower the risk of many of them, including heart disease, type 2 diabetes, and certain kinds of cancer. "If you eat vegetables at lunch, for a snack, and at dinner, you'll likely nail the recommendation," says Blake. Salads and veggie sides are obvious choices, but vegetable soup, salsa, and crudité with dip will help you meet your quota as well.

### Choose whole grains.

They deliver fiber, B vitamins, and minerals and are linked to a reduced risk of heart disease and type 2 diabetes. Refined grains, like white rice and white flour, lose half to two-thirds of their nutrients during the refining process. The least processed grains you can buy are those in their whole form, like farro, barley, and quinoa. Next best are products made with whole-grain flour, like pasta and bread.

### Read labels.

You're looking for three main indicators of how nutritious your food is, with some exceptions. First, the ingredients list should be relatively short (something like veggie lasagna will have more ingredients than roasted nuts, which is fine) and made up of things you generally recognize. Second, the first three ingredients ideally won't be sugar or any of its pseudonyms, such as evaporated cane juice or fructose (unless it's a dessert). Finally, says Blake, "if the first ingredient is a grain, it should say 'whole' in front of it." Look at fat, fiber, and protein if you have orders from a doctor or dietitian to do so, but otherwise don't worry about them too much. And know that occasionally eating processed stuff that veers wildly from these guidelines won't harm your health, says Stephanie Clarke, RD, cofounder of C&J Nutrition in New York City. "If you love Cheetos, feel free to eat them once in a while."



**"Just because something is convenient doesn't mean it's not close to nature. Even almonds are processed."**

## THERE'S NO NEED TO...

### Avoid all processed foods.

Some of the healthiest foods we eat are technically "processed." Processed foods exist on a spectrum. On one end is fruit-flavored cereal, devoid of nutrients and colored with Blue No. 1 (not poison, but also not something you want in three meals a day). On the other end are fruits and vegetables flash-frozen at peak ripeness (which may help them retain more nutrients than fresh produce). "Just because something is convenient doesn't mean it's not close to nature," says Blake. "Even almonds are processed." So are rolled oats, canned tomatoes and beans, and broth, all of which have been altered in some way to be more edible, digestible, or safe.

### Detox.

Yes, toxins exist—mostly in pesticide residue, charred meat, and large quantities of alcohol—but they aren't invading every nook and cranny of your fridge. And unless you've somehow ingested so many toxins that you've landed in the ER, your liver and kidneys will excrete them on their own, no help or fasting required. "Your body is very efficient at taking the nutrients it needs from foods and getting rid of the rest," says Blake. "If you really want to clean your GI tract, you need more whole grains, fruit, and vegetables, not less food."

Blake also advises against taking a break from gluten, dairy, corn, soy, or any other purportedly gut-damaging, inflammatory, craving-inducing foods. If you

think you might have an allergy or intolerance, see a board-certified allergist, gastroenterologist, or registered dietitian. Otherwise, elimination diets can create nutritional gaps and even bring you more gastrointestinal distress.

### Fear food that's conventionally grown.

Many food-label claims, such as “natural,” aren't regulated by the USDA. And even the ones that are, such as “organic,” don't promise clear-cut benefits. “Organic systems use fewer pesticides, which is good for human health and the health of the planet, but they also have lower yields, which means you need more natural resources to produce the same amount of food,” says Tim Griffin, PhD, director of the Agriculture, Food and Environment program at Tufts University. If you do choose organic, Clarke advises focusing on produce. Strawberries, spinach, stone fruit, apples, grapes, and pears tend to contain the most pesticide residue. But if organic food isn't in the budget, it's OK. You should still eat plenty of produce, even if it's conventional.

### A CLEAN TABLE AND A CLEAR MIND

While the value of a clean eating–style diet may be debatable, a cleaner, more mindful approach to your meals is a win. “Paying attention to taste, texture, and smell can maximize the pleasure you get out of food,” says Kronberg. And studies show it could also offer many of the benefits associated with clean eating: helping lower your blood sugar, improving your digestion, and making it easier to lose weight. Sit down at the table (cleared of bills and folded laundry), not in front of the TV or your laptop. Then slow the pace by taking small bites, setting down your fork or taking a sip of water between each, and chewing thoroughly.



### Be overly rigid.

Declaring something off-limits can also make it more tempting—and lead to guilt when you inevitably “cheat” by eating something that isn't “clean.” “Calling something ‘dirty’ has profound implications, especially for people prone to troubled relationships with food, who believe if they eat something unclean, they'll become that way themselves,” says biochemist turned professional chef Anthony Warner, author of *The Angry Chef's Guide to Spotting Bullsh\*t in the World of Food*. Plus, the stress of avoiding supposedly dirty foods kind of sucks the joy out of breaking bread. “The point of eating healthy is to support your

aliveness, not encroach on it,” says Sondra Kronberg, RD, executive director of the Eating Disorder Treatment Collaborative in Jericho, New York.

Instead of demonizing foods (and lamenting their exile), recognize that all foods have value, whether they deliver the perfect mix of macronutrients, remind you of your childhood, or just taste delicious. Eat what makes you feel happy and healthy, and tune in to your body so you'll stop when you've had enough. “Yes, food is fuel,” says Kronberg, “but it also gives us pleasure and brings us together around the table. Rigid beliefs create anxiety and can suppress your internal hunger cues, making it difficult to eat in a relaxed way that meets your physical, emotional, and social needs.”